SE Editorial/Opinion

HD **Easy pickings for haters**

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It was oddly fitting for a Fort McMurray conference on the impacts of energy development to fly in South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu as its keynote speaker.

In statements through the weekend the revered religious leader, best known for his antiapar theid work, spoke the word against the Alberta oilsands, labelling them "filth," their development a symptom of the world's "negligence and greed" and the fight against climate change a "moral struggle to define this century."

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"If we don't do something urgently, quickly, we won't have a world," he said.

In a previous foray into environmental issues, Tutu wrote in the British newspaper The Guardian that he opposed the Keystone XL pipeline from the oilsands to the U.S.

In the same article, he called for an apartheid-era style boycott of energy products and energy-producing firms.

To stop climate change, he wrote, "is a responsibility that begins with God commanding the first human inhabitants of the garden of Eden 'to till it and keep it.' To keep it; not to abuse it, not to destroy it."

If you've ever felt the antioilsands movement has turned into some kind of religion-like crusade, now you know why.

Indeed, climate-change activism would have you believe that all greenhouse gases are bad, that there is irrefutable proof of a runaway greenhouse effect in our future if we don't moderate our GHG emissions.

Climate science, however, is a little less absolute.

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is filled with charts showing a trend of rising surface temperatures, rising water levels, melting ice caps and rising emissions of greenhouse gases ... but it's also filled with qualifiers.

The report's authors express varying degrees of confidence in scientists' historical analysis and forecasts, both for emissions and temperature changes.

They temper their statements with all sorts of caution because evidence is not proof -- and it's just the way you want science to be.

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This openness is what separates those who engage in the scientific method from those who engage in vaguely scientific activism.

Even if you see current climate- change projections as immutable gospel, the Alberta oilsands are merely low-hanging fruit -- a symbolic target, easy to reach, easy to slag.

Shutting it down just means we'll be getting our oil somewhere else. How is that even remotely helpful?

All energy extraction is disruptive and dirty, even those methods we think of as green.

This includes oilsands activity, of course, and Alberta's energy industry should continue its work to lessen its overall environmental impact.

But with the oilsands producing less than 1% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, those who wish to reduce GHG output must surely understand we'll need to clean up other forms of energy production to have any useful impact.

Much of the world's GHG emissions come from coal-powered energy, for example. Where's the popular outcry to curtail our consumption of that resource?

Maybe it's the need to have a bad guy in the environmental activism narrative. Big Oil is easy to hate. There's a lot of money to be made to quench our seemingly insatiable thirst for hydrocarbons.

And when something goes wrong-- pipeline leaks, tanker spills, fiery derailments -- the impact is noticeable and everyone takes notice.

Tutu told his captive Fort McMurray audience that too many of us are deaf and blind to the negative side-effects of oilsands development.

I respectfully submit it is His Grace and his flock who are deaf and blind to the bigger picture.

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